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LETTER DATED 8 JUNE 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ERITREA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to attach a statement by His Excellency Mr. Haile Weldensae, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea, on behalf of President Isaias Afwerki, to the Summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) being held at Ouagadougou, on the prevailing crisis between my country, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate this letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Haile MENKERIOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Eritrea to the Summit of the Organization of African Unity, held at Ouagadougou

Allow me first to express the utmost gratitude of my Government to His Excellency Blaise Campaore, President of Burkina Faso, and to the people of Burkina Faso for the warm hospitality that has been accorded to us. Allow me also to congratulate the people and Government of Burkina Faso for hosting this year two important occasions: the splendid African Cup of Nations and, of course, this august Summit of the Organization of African Unity Heads of State and Government. May I proceed to convey to you the following message from President Isaias Afwerki, who could not attend this august session, inasmuch as he would have desired to do so, due to the grave developments that face our country.

It saddens me deeply to bring to your attention the dispute between Eritrea and our neighbour, Ethiopia, which has brought the two countries to the brink of war. This is all the more painful as the border dispute in itself is amenable to a legal and peaceful solution, rendering any recourse to force both unnecessary and unjustifiable. At the same time, we are highly appreciative of, and much encouraged by, the concern that Africa's Heads of State and Government, as well as this august assembly have shown to help us overcome this crisis. I was touched by the many African Heads of State and Government who called me to communicate their concern and constructive views and to offer their good offices to facilitate a peaceful resolution of this unfortunate problem. I also wish to avail myself of this opportunity to express the thanks of my Government and people to leaders all over the world who have added their voices and efforts to the search for peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Allow me also to mention that I had communicated with His Excellency Robert Mugabe, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, in his capacity as the current chairman of the organization, as well as to Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim, so as to ensure that Africa and the OAU would not only be seized of the matter, but would also make a significant contribution to peace.

I do not wish to go into detail to explain the nature of our problem with the Government of Ethiopia. I would rather prefer to concentrate on our views and concrete proposals for defusing the current explosive situation and finding a legal and durable solution.

As Your Excellencies are only too well aware, this is not the first border dispute between two African countries, as well as among neighbours in other continents. As it happens, the colonial boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia is among the most clearly defined colonial boundaries; indeed, it was established by a series of international treaties at the beginning of this century and has remained unchanged for over 90 years. Even, if despite this fact, differences arise, the understanding between the two Governments was that these could be settled bilaterally and amicably.

Unfortunately, the Government of Ethiopia has, over the past few years, been encroaching upon Eritrean territory, forcibly bringing under its control Eritrean areas that Ethiopia has now claimed are Ethiopian. To this day, the Ethiopian army remains inside the boundaries of Eritrea in the Setit, Mareb and Bada areas.

These are grave acts of aggression, as they involve a re-drawing of the recognized colonial boundaries in clear violation of the OAU Charter. They could also set a dangerous precedent. And yet the problem still could have been solved peacefully and legally. It is this conviction that prompted the Government of Eritrea to propose a full demilitarization of all border areas, pending the demarcation of the entire boundary between the two countries on the basis of the recognition and respect of the colonial treaties.

The Government of Eritrea further underlined that the question of temporary administration of the civilian centres in the demilitarized areas could be handled with necessary flexibility in the interim period, as the jurisdiction of the sovereign State could be reinstated as soon as the demarcation of the boundary is completed.

The recommendations that emerged from the facilitation process, and to which we contributed positively, have embodied these salient requirements and, therefore, form a good basis for a comprehensive solution. But if the real objective is genuinely to defuse the crisis, avoid war and achieve a peaceful settlement, rather than scoring short-term propaganda and diplomatic gains, we must also insist and ensure that the fundamental issues of detail and implementation be addressed satisfactorily. The premature announcement of the recommendations before discussions on these outstanding issues were exhausted was not helpful, as it has led to confusion and complications.

I wish to draw your attention to the fact that the real stumbling block to a speedy and genuine solution is not differences over general principles or the temporary authority over civilian centres in the demilitarized areas. The real stumbling block to peace is Ethiopia's logic of force and spiral of measures which have begun by blowing the problem out of proportion and have ended up escalating the conflict to the brink of full-scale war.

Even as it pays lip service to peace, Ethiopia has tread on the path of war. On the same day that it professed acceptance of the facilitators' recommendations, the Government of Ethiopia announced that: "Ethiopia's armed forces have been given orders today" to mount attacks on Eritrea. This is a re-declaration of war, as Ethiopia had earlier threatened Eritrea with full-scale war unless it bowed to Ethiopia's continued occupation of territories that it claims.

In line with this belligerent policy of imposing its wishes through force and intimidation, the Government of Ethiopia has taken a number of hostile and illegal actions that have precluded the relaxation of the tensions and continued to escalate the conflict. Thus, Ethiopia's air strike on the Eritrean capital, Asmara, on Friday, 6 June 1998, just a day after the Government had given orders to the armed forces, has threatened to transform a border dispute into a state of war between the two nations. Ethiopia has now gone to the extent of

threatening that it will attack any commercial aircraft in Eritrean airspace and any vessels in Eritrean ports. This is intolerable to any sovereign State.

I have briefly attempted to present our views on the causes and measures that have transformed what was an easily solvable border dispute into a major crisis between two member States of the organization. I would now like to turn my attention to the more important issue of a solution to the current crisis. In that context, allow me to present the following proposals for your consideration:

1. The Government of Eritrea renews its call for an end to all hostilities. This has been Eritrea's position all along. The Government of Eritrea has also insisted on a full demilitarization of the border areas that will ensure that hostilities, once stopped, will not recur. On the other hand, Ethiopia has yet to clearly renounce the use of force as a means of solving this problem.

2. The Government of Eritrea calls for the start of direct talks between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the presence of high-level mediators. This, we believe, will ensure a speedy resolution, as the facilitation process that has been under way, while very positive and fruitful, has been a roundabout and time-consuming process. In the explosive circumstances obtaining between the two countries, in which their armies are facing each other all along their common borders, a mechanism that ensures a timely and legally binding solution is crucial.

3. The Government of Eritrea requests of this august summit of Heads of State and Government that it establish an African mechanism at the highest possible level to ensure that our continent and our organization, the Organization of African Unity, make a decisive contribution to the efforts to find peace between two African neighbours.

The unfortunate conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia poses yet another test of the strength and resilience of our organization. I am confident that Africa and the OAU will rise up to the challenge and help us and our Ethiopian neighbours achieve peace and direct our undivided attention once again to the task of nation-building.